

LAYING A FIRM FOUNDATION FOR LITERACY ACQUISITION FROM HOME THROUGH (LITERACY)PRINT-RICH ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

Literacy remains the life wire to every educational achievement because of its indispensable roles in fostering formal learning. It is the most important step towards any nation's economic and social growth. Literacy is all about empowerment, which increases awareness and influences the behaviours of individuals, families and communities. Many researchers have repeatedly confirmed that majority of Nigerians especially the youths cannot read basically due to poor foundation in reading or apathy for reading. Literacy culture is best imbibed when a child is still growing up; just like every other developmental task. It has its critical stage when it is best assimilated. The crux of this study is to appraise ways through which a solid foundation in literacy could be laid from the home front. This is because genetics and environment have major parts to play in the development of a child. Therefore issues like: home environment; importance of literacy-rich environment and facilitations and scaffolds in print-rich environment for functional literacy are examined in this paper with respect to their roles towards laying a firm foundation for literacy acquisition. It recommends and concludes that in the homes, there should be a solid base for literacy acquisition through exposing children to literacy materials such as murals, desuggestopadia, and access to print as channels for laying and sustaining life-long literacy learning.

Keywords: Foundation,Literacy acquisition, home, print-rich, environment

Introduction

Literacy is a means for development which enables people to access new opportunities and participate in society in new ways. It is a right and every individual is entitled to this right. Like every other human right, without it people may not have equal life chances. It is the most important step towards any nation's economic and social growth such that even one of

the major reforms in the United States of America is the ‘No Child Left Behind Act’ (NCLB) of 2001 which also aims to ensure equal access of every child to obtain high quality education. The economic state of every country is closely linked to the literacy level of that society. Therefore, UNESCO (2005:21) succinctly admits that:

Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling an individuals to achieve his or her goals, develop his/her knowledge and potential and participate fully in community and wider society.

This means that functionality is at the heart of literacy. It is a process not an end point and in fact, the only prerequisite as well as the passport to life long learning. According to UNESCO (2005), literacy is all about empowerment which increases awareness and influences the behaviour of individuals, families’ and communities. It enhances communication skills and builds the self confidence and self esteem needed to make decision. This means that literacy is a benchmark for the categorization of societies and individuals as developed and underdeveloped (Otaghuruagu,2007). A literate person is not just one, who reads and writes, but one who can functionally read and write. Functionalism is the essence of literacy because it enables one to function normally and efficiently in a given society at any given time.

However, there has been an outcry on the dwindling levels of our youths with respect to their literacy levels. According to Arua (1999), over one billion people, a vast majority of those who live in Africa cannot read. This deficiency in reading is high among Nigerian youths. This could be attributed to the poor priority given to literacy in Nigeria and the reading culture of most Nigerians. In Otagburuagu’s (2006:8) view:

Nigeria has continued to strive to improve on the literacy rate. For example the nomadic education programme, the UBE and more recently, the mass literacy programme tagged “improving Access to community education and literacy using rancho” are some of the laudable efforts towards this direction. In spite of these, the hue and cry is that victory in the war against illiteracy is still far-fetched.

The problem of literacy is not solely with the methods of teaching reading in schools but embraces other factors such as the learner, the teacher, physical factors, such as the learning environment, home factor, etc. The home is the centre of this paper. If the home which is the first institution a child is initiated into, lays a solid foundation for literacy acquisition, then the school and larger society would only complement it. This is because reading is a treasure and a pearl. According to Onukaogu (2007), this pearl should

adorn our everyday life, if we want to measure out with other developed countries in the world. Regrettably, a reasonable number of Nigerian youth enters the “recycle bin” of the illiterates in the country and we cannot dismiss the fact that they form an integral part of any country nor can there be any optimum development without harnessing the literacy capacity of the young in society. Given the high illiteracy level of the generality of Nigerians, especially the youths, there is no way substantial development can be achieved without carrying the youths along and making them occupy the position that are rightly theirs (Maduabuchi, 2008). Most people who claim to be graduates do not have the ability to read fluently and most often they have difficulty with writing. This is because emphasis seems to be placed more on certificates rather than functionalism. As a lecturer in one of the universities in Nigeria, i experience a great degree of illiteracy amongst our seemingly literate undergraduates and it is highly appalling and needs a redress which can start from the home.

Literacy is indeed an ornament that every nation needs to wear in order to compete favourably with the other developed countries, if it is to offer credible life for its citizenry. Therefore, reading is a vital literacy tool that can catalyze and sustain development in our country and the only way it can be promoted is to empower all Nigerians especially the youths with reading skills. This empowerment has to start in the home through exposure to print-rich environment. The home needs to be well equipped for the challenges in the larger society. If a house has a shallow foundation, it is bound to collapse. If a child has a weak literacy foundation from home, there is the fear that every other subsequent block of literacy placed on the foundation might collapse as well.

Home Environment as a Foundation for Solid Literacy Acquisition

Home environment consists of the private living quarters of a family and its surroundings. It also includes the material and spiritual influences that affect the growth, development and existence of a living being. In Africa, the concept of home environment also extends to the parents, children, extended family members and the activities that go on in the families. In the Nigerian context, according to (Ogah 2008:1):

Two major types of homes could be identified; the traditional home with illiterate parents, family elders and the modern homes with literate parents. These two major types of homes exert different influences on literacy skill development of their children.

In the traditional homes, a lot of activities that go on in such environments affect the growth of the children directly or indirectly. A Nigerian child who grows up in a typical traditional home is highly marginalized. He or she is in an atmosphere, where children should be seen

and not heard because they are to learn from the adults who know it all. These children accept this kind of authority of the adults, which invariably stifles and suppresses the child's curiosity and inquisitiveness except otherwise threatened. This kind of authority seems to hinder the development of originality and creativity in the children. Literacy culture is best imbibed when people are young and like other developmental tasks, it has its critical stage. Therefore when a child cultivates this habit early in life, an all round development follows suit but the reverse is the case in a traditional home.

The literate and semi-literate homes usually have parents that are literate to some extent and in most cases can afford some of the modern electronics gadget such as the T.V, computer toys, etc but may not be readily available to monitor or guide the usage. These children are often left in the care of the house help, while some literate ones may hire the services of a paid teacher to conduct lessons for the children. It is an accepted opinion but not without supervision otherwise the children might turn the home into a rendezvous for jamboree and other kinds of unruly behaviour. In most cases, the children, who are left in the mercy of the housemaids, can stay glued to the television watching some amorous programmes that are not meant for their age until they get exhausted and fall asleep. Literacy acquisition may be a far cry from what these children learn at the critical stage of their lives. Family literacy is based on the assumption that reading begins at home because if the base is solid, subsequent levels of learning should have fewer problems. Ihebuzor (1999:2) asserts that "family literacy re-situates the home as the epicentre of learning and recognizes its major potentials as a vast learning laboratory full of learning material and experiences."

There are two major factors that can shape the life of a child born into any society: genetic or environmental. Genetic factors sometimes seem to be beyond human, but the environmental factors can easily be controlled to suit the life of a growing child positively. The home is the basis for subsequent growth in a child's life, therefore the richer the child's environment, the better the child's chances of developing fully in all positive respects. A child's life at this stage is based on imitation of adults around him/her and the environment has a lot to play in such. Let us consider the importance of home print rich environment to a child's literacy acquisition and development.

The Importance of Literacy Print - rich Environment of the Home to Literacy Acquisition

The home environment can be a very good foundation for literacy development if positively enriched because a lot goes on in the home. Early childhood is a period of rapid learning during which children undergo major developmental transitions across a broad range of domains especially

entrance into formal language. This is because language enables children to share meaning with others and participate in cultural learning in unprecedented ways (Tamis Le Monda & Rodriques, 2008).

The home environment of a child can either make or mar a child's literacy acquisition. An old joke says that “ if we taught a child to talk the same way we teach them to read, we will have a lot of non talkers”, but if we turn the joke around, it would read: “Let us teach children to read the way we teach them to talk then there won't be so many non readers. The home environment needs to be print rich because it provides a good foundation for literacy acquisition at school. Marjorie (2004:14) laments that:

Children who have not been read to arrive at school unable to process the dialects of book talk. They understand only context laden language, which utilizes both the situation and non-verbal communication to add meaning to the words. When confronted with the decontextualized language found in the books, these youngsters don't know how to make sense of it.

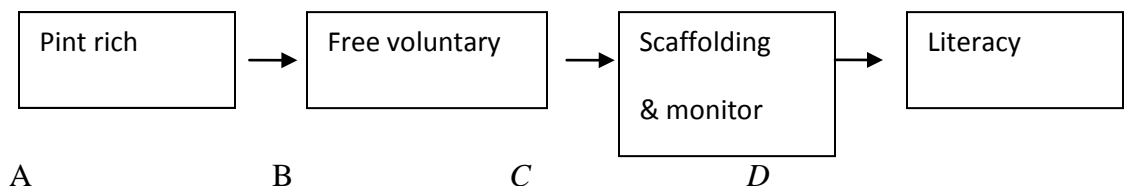
Print- rich environment of a home is meant to boost the children's interest and desire for reading because adults can act as models, advisors, resources, and cheerleaders to children when they learn to read just as they do when children learn to talk. This is because learning occurs in a social-cultural context where adults and primary care-givers scaffold young children to higher levels of thinking and acting. In Vygotsky's words, children who experience sensitive cognitively stimulating home environments early in developments are at an advantage in the learning process, hence the importance of print-rich environment. Television and other media have taken the order of the day. In affirmation of this assertion, Udosen and Afangideh (2006) confirm that while the home has been identified in other societies to play the major role in learning to read, the schools seem to be tasked with that responsibility here in Nigeria (Shins-Machleidt, 1990; Odejide, 1993).

So much reading goes on in an ideal-rich environment that one might be tempted to ask, if such a family ever has a television, video set, DSTV the like. In other words, some families engage in so much literacy activities that they rarely have time for some frivolous activities that are time consuming but captivatingly carried out on the social media such as the afore mentioned. Television has remained the major culprit to children's inability to read in Nigeria. Many such as Healy (1990) and Marjorie (2004) writers have blamed television for people's inability to read, but in a family where strong literacy foundation have been laid through print- rich environment, the parents in such families enjoy books, but they also enjoy television because they believe that selected limited viewing is not necessarily bad

because children could be exposed to vast array of ideas and information through television. Marjorie (2004:21) in citing Healy (1990) confirms that:

When adult make television viewing an intellectually active rather than passive experience, viewing can be a source of language and critical thinking and a vehicle for transmitting values as well as a source of information. In this way, television can provide a valuable background for literacy. However, when families use television viewing as a substitute for reading, talking, thinking and families' interaction, it has negative consequences.

The above assertion is confirms that television has some didactic lessons and programmes that can even enhance literacy acquisition, when properly managed. However, there are some activities enriching literacy print environment in the home with proper guidance which can actually stimulate literacy activities in the homes because a relationship actually exist among, print environment, free voluntary reading, scaffolding or monitor by adult and literacy development.



(In any home where there is literacy print-rich environment, there seems to be urge to indulge in free voluntary reading because the environment is friendly; the activity requires scaffolding and guidance from any literate adult in the family, which, when properly handled, leads to literacy development $A+B+C=D$)

Although the relationship amongst these variables is always positive, yet Pack (2000) provides clear evidence that simply providing access is not always enough. Other activities and scaffolds act to make it desirable.

Facilitations and Scaffolds in Literacy Print - rich Environment

A (literacy) print rich home is one in which different kinds of prints are displayed, wall stories, labeled murals, etc. The importance of such conducive homes cannot be overemphasized. Literate parents sometimes take initiatives in providing imaginative and attractive environment for their children to learn in the home. Here are some of the facilitations and scaffolds that could take place in a print-rich environment in order to lay firm foundation for literacy acquisition:

- Early and consistent participation in routine learning activities such as story telling, and teaching letters and numbers should be

encouraged because it would initiate long standing culture in them that cannot be easily disabused.

- The amount and style of language that parents use when conversing with their children is one of the strongest predictors of children's early language and learning. Children benefit from exposure to adult speech that is varied and rich in information about objects. Therefore there should be quality parent-child interaction to enhance literacy acquisition.
- The provision of learning materials in the home support children's language and learning. This is because young children's exposure to variety of age-appropriate learning materials predicts language and literacy skill (Tabors, Roach, & Snow, 2001). These materials provide opportunities for conversational exchanges about specific objects or toys. This access may facilitate children's curiosity, exploration, mastery, motivation and positive approach to learning.
- Children need to consistently receive warmth, sensitivity, and responsiveness from parents.
- Parents' sense of personal efficacy will develop from successful, positive, parenting experiences. Such as using household items to point out letters, numbers and words. Plan playful literacy experiences.
- When children point out letters and begin to recognize words or letters ,try and expand their understanding by putting them in context. e.g 'A' is for Apple, yes, it also stands for "Ada", and even found in "Angel"etc.
- Parents or care providers can also turn a walk into a learning activity by playing games such as pointing out the names you can see on signs (Lavadenz,2008)
- Create an avenue for desuggestopadia i.e. integration of the fine art and making the reading room or the learning rendezvous very cheerful and colourful.
- Create room for peripheral learning in the children's rooms and study/library as well. Students can learn from what is present in the environment even if their attentions are not directed to it.
- In the home, hearing stories and reading aloud are not only beneficial; it is pleasant therefore it should be encouraged because a lot of children want to be read to. Children who are read to at home read more on their own (Neumann 1995 & Krashen, 2004)
- Every parent in the home should provide a warm, sensitive and responsive parenting. Most parents give their jobs high priority than the children's well being. Sensitivity to your child's progress and

then warm cordial relationship will bring out the best of a child in a reading environment.

- Parents and home environment should have appropriate expectations for child's learning and development. This will make the child to work hard since the home environment buttresses his /her effort.
- The print-rich environment of a home should guide the child in problem solving. Apart from making reading materials readily available in the homes, the accessibility of such knowledge by a child should be scaffolded by an adult, model or caregiver.
- Adequate support for literacy in the home should be encouraged. The print-rich environment of the home has already been the premise on which a child develops other literacy skills, therefore the models, parents and caregivers in the homes should strive to enhance this.
- The home environment should facilitate shared book reading with the child. Parents and children alike should share their reading materials for obvious reasons.

Conclusion

The position of the home as the foundation for literacy acquisition through print-rich environment cannot be overemphasized considering the position of home in the life of a child. Experience has shown that children from birth observe what adults do and imitate what they see or hear. One of the things children imitate is speech which has a great implication on the child's mastery of reading and writing. Functional literacy is the preoccupation of children coming to school from home because the home engages them in functional learning through imitation of the adults, siblings, and the influence of the environment.

Laying a firm foundation for literacy acquisition from home through print-rich environment presupposes cohesion and the spirit of sharing among the family members. It equally assumes that parents are themselves literate and have the materials with which to lay the literate foundation of their children.

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